

4. CULT WITHOUT OBEDIENCE

JEREMIAH 7:1 – 8:3

¹The word that came to Jeremiah from YHWH: ²Stand in the gate of YHWH's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of YHWH, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship YHWH.

³Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and so that I may dwell with you in this place.

⁴Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH." ⁵For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly act justly one with another, ⁶if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, ⁷then you may dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

⁸Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. ⁹Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, ¹⁰and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? ¹¹Do you think that this house, which is called by my name, is a robbers' den? You know, I too am watching, says YHWH.

The setting for this scene is given later in chapter 26. The fact that this and the following passages are in prose suggests that we are dealing with a text that is written to apply Jeremiah's message to exilic and post-exilic circumstances. The fact that the Septuagint Version is much briefer has led some scholars to suggest that some of this section may have been added after the Greek translation appeared.

It appears to be written in light of the Exile, picking up Jeremiah's insistence that possession of the land is not unconditional, but depends on the people obeying YHWH's will. It is not difficult to imagine this text being a reminder to those entering the second (post-exilic) temple of the behaviour that is expected of them. There are obvious connections with the Decalogue (see Exodus 20:13-16; Deuteronomy 5:17-20).

The Jeremiah tradition is in direct conflict with the temple ideology that claimed that the temple is YHWH's temple, and that YHWH had made an unconditional commitment to 'dwell with you in this place' (verse 3; compare Isaiah 37:33-35).

Jeremiah insists that the fact that the temple is YHWH's does not guarantee security to those who enter it, nor does proper cult substitute for proper behaviour. There is no automatic asylum granted to sinners who think to take refuge in God's house. We cannot escape the demands of the covenant by hiding in liturgical cult. People may think they can fool themselves, and their neighbours, but they cannot fool YHWH. God is not blind!

If verses 1-7 seem to hold out hope for repentance, verses 8-11 leave one with the impression that the time for repentance is past. The people obstinately cling to their false hopes, and refuse to alter their way of behaving.

Psalm 78:56-72 gives us an insight into the mind-set of those who recognised that Shiloh was destroyed (by the Philistines) because the people failed to honour the covenant, but that YHWH was absolutely, unconditionally committed to Jerusalem and its sanctuary.

Jeremiah contradicts that ideology. Their obstinate refusal to listen means that YHWH will treat Jerusalem as he treated Shiloh. Just as the northern kingdom was occupied and the people sent into exile, so it will be for Judah (verse 15).

In verses 16-20 the focus is on the prophet (compare 1:15-19). One of the elements that characterised the mission of a true prophet was the power of his intercession with YHWH (see Exodus 32:11-24; 1Samuel 7:9). Jeremiah was accepted as a genuine prophet because his warnings, though unpopular, proved true. This passage appears to be a later explanation of how it was that Jeremiah was a genuine prophet in spite of the fact that his intercession failed. Nothing less than a catastrophe would get this stubborn people to repent. Jeremiah did not fail. YHWH commanded him not to intercede for the people (verse 16, see also 11:14; 14:11).

In desperate times people will do anything in the hope of averting disaster. It appears that in the build up to the destruction of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians, the people, instead of changing their behaviour and turning to YHWH, chose to keep on living the way they were but to have recourse to magic by worshipping Astarte, the Canaanite goddess, consort of Baal and 'queen of heaven'. Amos made a similar criticism of the behaviour in Samaria which resulted in the exile under the Assyrians (see Amos 5:26-27).

¹²Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. ¹³And now, because you have done all these things, says YHWH, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, ¹⁴therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh. ¹⁵I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim.

¹⁶As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you. ¹⁷Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? ¹⁸The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger.

¹⁹Is it I whom they provoke? says YHWH. Is it not themselves, to their own hurt? ²⁰Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: My anger and my wrath shall be poured out on this place, on human beings and animals, on the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground; it will burn and not be quenched.

²¹Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. ²²For in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. ²³But this command I gave them, "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you." ²⁴Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but, in the stubbornness of their evil will, they walked in their own counsels, and turned away from me. ²⁵From the day that your ancestors came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day; ²⁶yet they did not listen to me, or pay attention, but they stiffened their necks. They did worse than their ancestors did. ²⁷So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. ²⁸You shall say to them: This is the nation that *does* not obey the voice of YHWH their God, and will not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.

There are different assessments of the place of sacrifice among the exilic and post-exilic editors. Not surprisingly, the Priestly School put a lot of stress on it. The Deuteronomic School puts the stress of obedience to God's word. This is typical of the attitude of those who edited the prophetic scrolls (see Jeremiah 6:20; Amos 4:4-5; 5:25; Hosea 6:6; 8:13; Deuteronomy 12:6). For them the essence of Yahwism is found, not in the cult, but in obedience. Obedience (listening) involves looking to YHWH for direction, and following YHWH's will (see Deuteronomy 6:4). The danger of cult is that it can maintain the power of those who control it.

They are to obey 'so that it may be well with you' (verse 23; see Deuteronomy 5:33). Four times we are told that 'they did not listen' (verses 24, 26, 27 and 28).

From the beginning God sent prophets to alert the people to how their behaviour was to be consistent with YHWH's will. But, also from the beginning, the response has been a persistent, stubborn, refusal to listen.

Each generation was worse than the one before. Jeremiah must carry on the prophetic tradition, but he should not expect that the people will listen, any more than their ancestors did (compare 1:16-19).

Judah is called to lament. From the reference to ‘cut off your hair ... on the bare heights’ it seems that YHWH is telling the people to carry on with their pagan mourning cult. It will do them no good, for ‘YHWH has rejected and forsaken the generation that provoked his wrath.’

The setting up of idols in the temple sanctuary is associated with the reign of King Manasseh (see 2Kings 21:2-8), as was the horrible practice of sacrificing children to the bloodthirsty pagan gods (see 2Kings 16:3; 21:6). In the desperate years just prior to the capture of Jerusalem (597) and its destruction, ten years later (587) the populace tried anything that might assuage God and effect their salvation (compare Jeremiah 44). Here it is claimed that such a practice has no authorisation from God (though see Ezekiel 20:25-26).

Such behaviour was directly contrary to the will of YHWH, and is recalled here to help ‘explain’ the terrible experience of slaughter and destruction. The valley of ben Hinnom to the south of Jerusalem witnessed mass burials and unburied corpses (compare 3:33 and Deuteronomy 28:26).

The absence of the joyful sounds associated with weddings symbolises the absence of any hope of life being renewed.

Not surprisingly the valley of Hinnom (Ge Hinnom; Greek: Gehenna) became a symbol of the self-destruction associated with cutting oneself off from God. Gehenna features in the New Testament, where it is translated ‘hell’.

**²⁹Cut off your hair
and throw it away;
raise a lamentation
on the bare heights.**

YHWH has rejected and forsaken the generation that provoked his wrath.

³⁰For the people of Judah have done evil in my sight, says YHWH; they have set up idols in the house that is called by my name, defiling it.

³¹And they go on building the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the Ben Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire—which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind.

³²Therefore, the days are surely coming, says YHWH, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the Ben Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter: for they will bury in Topheth until there is no more room. ³³The corpses of this people will be food for the vultures and the wild beasts; and no one will frighten them away. ³⁴And I will bring to an end the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of the bride and bridegroom in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for the land shall be laid waste.

¹At that time, says YHWH, the bones of the kings of Judah, the bones of its officials, the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem shall be brought out of their tombs; ²and they shall be spread before the sun and the moon and all the host of heaven, which they have loved and served, which they have followed, and which they have *consulted* and worshipped; and they shall not be gathered or reburied; they shall be like dung on the surface of the ground. ³Death shall be preferred to life by all the remnant that remains of this evil family in all the places where I have driven them, says YHWH of hosts.

Verses 1-2 speak of desecration of the bones of those who are destroyed by YHWH's anger. They have forsaken YHWH to worship the heavenly bodies. Their bones will be dug up and exposed to the gaze of these same bodies.

In verse 3 we are told that the condition of those who survive will be even worse, such that they will wish they were among the dead.

Carroll writes (page 225):

7:1 – 8:3 combines a number of reflections on cultic matters in Jerusalem and its environs. Starting off with the crowds flocking to the temple in Jerusalem, it finishes with images of the ground covered in corpses and the survivors driven away to alien parts. Silence and desolation cover the temple mount, and the fate of that shrine indicates the incorrectness of the worship offered there.